William Golding - Lord of the Flies (1954)

Lord of the Flies is a novel by Nobel Prize-winning author William Golding about a group of British boys stuck on a deserted island who try to govern themselves, with disastrous results. Its stances on the already-controversial subjects of human nature and individual welfare versus the common good earned it position 68 on the American Library Association's list of the 100 most frequently challenged books of 1990–1999.[1] In 2005 the novel was chosen by TIME magazine as one of the 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to 2005.[2] It was awarded a place on both lists of Modern Library 100 Best Novels, reaching #41 on the editor's list, and #25 on the reader's list.

Published in 1954, Lord of the Flies was Golding's first novel. Although it was not a great success at the time—selling fewer than 3,000 copies in the United States during 1955 before going out of print—it soon went on to become a best-seller, and by the early 1960s was required reading in many schools and colleges; the novel is currently renowned for being a popular choice of study for GCSE English Literature courses in the United Kingdom. It was adapted to film in 1963 by Peter Brook, and again in 1990 by Harry Hook.

Background

The book indicates that it takes place in the midst of an unspecified nuclear war. Some of the marooned characters are ordinary students, while others arrive as a musical choir under an established leader. Most (with the exception of the choirboys) appear never to have encountered one another before. The book portrays their descent into savagery; left to themselves in a paradisiacal country, far from modern civilisation, the well-educated children regress to a primitive state.

At an allegorical level, the central theme is the conflicting impulses toward civilization—live by rules, peacefully and in harmony—and towards the will to power. Themes include the tension between groupthink and individuality, between rational and emotional reactions, and between morality and immorality. How these play out, and how different people feel the influences of these, form a major subtext of Lord of the Flies.[3]

Plot summary

In the midst of a wartime evacuation, a British plane crashes onto an isolated island in a remote region of the Pacific Ocean. The only survivors are male children below the age of 13.[4] Two boys, the fair-haired Ralph and an overweight, bespectacled boy reluctantly nicknamed "Piggy" find a conch, which Ralph uses as a horn to bring all the survivors to one area. Ralph emerges as one of the survivors' leaders during the meeting, as does Jack Merridew, a member of a boys' choir that survived the crash. The survivors elect Ralph as their "chief", losing only the votes of Jack's fellow choirboys, who support their leader. Ralph asserts two primary goals: to have fun and to maintain a smoke signal that could alert passing ships to their presence on the island. The boys decide that a conch shell they found embodies the society they shall create on

the island, and declare that whoever holds the conch shall also receive the respect of the larger group.

Jack organises his choir group into a hunting party responsible for discovering a food source; Ralph, Jack, and a boy named Simon soon form a troika of leaders. Piggy, though Ralph's only confidante, is quickly made an outcast by his fellow "biguns" (older boys) and becomes an unwilling source of laughs for the other children. Simon, in addition to supervising the project of constructing shelters, feels an instinctive need to protect the younger boys.

The semblance of order imposed by Ralph and Simon quickly deteriorates as the majority of the boys turn idle and begin to develop paranoias about the island, referring to a supposed monster, the "beast", which dwells nearby. Jack, who has started a power struggle with Ralph, gains control of the discussion by boldly promising to kill the beast. At one point, Jack summons all of his hunters to hunt down a wild pig, drawing away those assigned to maintain the signal fire. After the fire burns out, a ship passes by the island, but does not stop as it has seen nothing amiss. Angered by this, Ralph considers relinquishing his position, but is convinced not to do so by Piggy.

While Jack schemes against Ralph, twins Sam and Eric, now assigned to the maintenance of the signal fire, see the corpse of a fighter pilot in the dark. Mistaking the corpse for the beast, they run to the cluster of shelters which Ralph and Simon have erected and warn the others. This unexpected meeting sees tensions between Jack and Ralph flare again. Shortly thereafter, Jack decides to lead a party to the other side of the island, where a heap of stones forms a place where he claims the beast resides. Only Ralph and Jack's supporter Roger agree to go; Ralph turns back shortly before the other two boys. When they arrive at the shelters, Jack calls an assembly and tries to turn the others against Ralph, asking for them to remove him from his position. Receiving little support, Jack, Roger, and another boy leave the shelters to form their own tribe. The tribe, which receives recruits from the main group of boys, grows in strength and begins to adopt customs common to primitive cultures, including face paint and bizarre rituals that include sacrifices to the beast. When the tribe grows to a size that rivals Ralph's, they begin to harass those who remain at the shelters and make pronouncements encouraging them to abandon Ralph and the societal order he has imposed.

Simon, unable to bear the stress of his position, goes off to think. Alone, he finds a severed pig head, left by Jack as an offering to the beast. Simon envisions the pig head, now swarming with scavenging flies, as the "Lord of the Flies" and believes that it is talking to him. Simon hears the pig identifying itself as the real "Beast" and disclosing the truth about itself –that the boys themselves "created" the beast, and that the real beast was inside them all. Simon also locates the dead parachutist who had been mistaken for the beast, and is the sole member of the group to recognise that it is a cadaver instead of a sleeping monster. Simon finds Jack's tribe in the island's interior, and tries to inform them of his discovery, but accidentally stumbles into a ritual dance and, mistaken for the beast, is killed. The dance is observed by Ralph, Piggy, Sam, and Eric, who feel guilty about what they have witnessed.

Jack and his band of "savages" decide that they should possess Piggy's glasses, the only means of starting a fire on the island. Raiding Ralph's camp, the savages confiscate the glasses and return to their abode near the great rock heap, called Castle Rock. Ralph, deserted by most of his supporters, journeys to Castle Rock to confront Jack and secure the glasses. Taking the conch and accompanied only by Piggy, Sam, and Eric, Ralph finds the tribe and demands that they return the valuable object. Turning against Ralph, the tribe takes Sam and Eric captive while Roger drops a boulder from his vantage point above, killing Piggy and shattering the conch. Ralph manages to escape, but Sam and Eric are tortured until they agree to join Jack's tribe.

The following morning, Jack orders his tribe to begin a manhunt for Ralph. Fleeing through the forest, Ralph watches as the "savages" set fire to the forest, drawing the attention of a passing naval vessel. A landing party from the vessel encounters Ralph as he desperately tries to escape the onrushing "savages", and the British officer leading the party, mistaking the violence for a game, says that he would have expected better from British boys.

Allegorical relationships

Ralph

When he and the others arrive on the island, Ralph quickly becomes the chief of the group, not by any harsh, overt or physical action, but by being elected.[5] Ralph is described as having "the directness of genuine leadership".[6] Ralph's first big decision is that they have "got to decide if this is an island".[7] After Ralph, Jack, and Simon discover that they are truly "on an uninhabited island",[8] Ralph suggests that a fire be lit because "if a ship comes near the island they may not notice us".[9] However, towards the end of the book he forgets the initial reason for maintaining the fire. This is representative of the debilitating effects corruption has even on the brightest mind. Ralph may seem to mean well, but often his obsession with being popular overcomes him and he resorts to bullying Piggy to regain his power. Still, in the midst of all the island's chaos, it should be noted that Ralph has a tendency to be polite and logical in the tensest of moments; for example, when the children are obliged to investigate Castle Rock, Ralph takes the lead despite being afraid of "the beast". Ralph is sometimes perceived as partially being a literary tool to aid the audience's realisation of inner evil throughout the duration of the novel; "Ralph wept for the end of innocence..."

Ralph embodies good intentions in the implementation of reason, but ultimately fails to execute these plans soundly. Ralph's refusal to resort to violence throughout the novel is counterpoised by Jack's inherent love of violence. Beginning with his self nomination as hunter, Jack eventually degenerates into the beast he is consumed with slaying. Towards the end of the story, Jack abandons the tribe and forms one of his own. His darkly irresistible nature, along with the lure of meat, immediately sways the majority of the island dwellers to his tribe, which is a much more violent group. Jack's insurrection begins a chain of events that drives the island further into chaos, initially resulting in the frenzied mob murdering

Simon during a primal dance, and then culminating with the murder of Piggy by Roger before the group attempts to hunt down Ralph.[10]

Piggy

Piggy is an intellectual, with poor eyesight, a weight problem, and asthma.[11] He is the most physically vulnerable of all the boys. By frequently quoting his aunt, he provides the only female voice.

Piggy's intellect benefits the group only through Ralph; he acts as Ralph's adviser. He cannot be the leader himself because he lacks leadership qualities and has no rapport with the other boys. Piggy relies on the power of social convention. He believes that holding the conch gives him the right to be heard. He believes that upholding social conventions produces results.

As the brainy representative of civilization, Piggy asserts that "Life...is scientific".[12] Ever the pragmatist, Piggy complains, "What good're you doing talking like that?"[13] when Ralph brings up the highly charged issue of Simon's death at their hands. Piggy tries to keep life scientific despite the incident, "searching for a formula"[14] to explain the death. He asserts that the assault on Simon was an accident, and justifiable because Simon asked for it by inexplicably crawling out of the forest into the ring.[14] Piggy is so intent on preserving some remnant of civilization on the island that, after Jack's tribe attacks Ralph's group, he assumes they "wanted the conch",[15] when, in fact, they have come for Piggy's glasses[15] in order to make fire. Even up to the moment of his death, Piggy's perspective does not shift in response to the reality of their situation. Because his eminently intellectual approach to life is modelled on the attitudes and rules of the authoritative adult world, he thinks everyone should share his values and attitudes as a matter of course. When Ralph and Piggy confront Jack's tribe about the stolen spectacles, Piggy asks "Which is better – to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill? [...] law and rescue, or hunting and breaking things up?"[16] as if there is no doubt that the boys would choose his preference.

The Conch

When first blown, it calls the children to an assembly, where Ralph is elected leader. They agree that only the boy holding the conch may speak at meetings to forestall arguments and chaos, and that it should be passed around to those who wish to voice their opinion. The conch symbolises democracy and, like Ralph, civility and order within the group. When Piggy is killed, the conch is smashed into pieces,[16] signalling the end of order and the onset of chaos.[3] Originally the conch is portrayed as being very vibrant and colourful, but as the novel progresses, its colours begin to fade, the same way society begins to fade on the island.

Jack Merridew

Jack epitomises the worst aspects of human nature when unrepressed or un-tempered by society. Like Ralph, Jack is a natural leader. Unlike Ralph, Jack appeals to more primal desires in the children and relies on his status as leader of the choirboys to justify his authority. Although his way of behaving is neither disruptive nor violent at the beginning of the

book, he does, at that time, express an unquenchable desire to hunt and kill a pig and spends hours in solitude traversing the island.

This first time Jack has an opportunity to kill a pig, he cannot, "because of the enormity of the knife descending and cutting into living flesh; because of the unbearable blood".[17] After this hesitation, for which he is most ashamed, Jack's blood lust grows more and more irrational, to the point where he abandons the fire (and causes the boys to miss a potential rescue) in order to hunt. During Jack's metamorphosis, he begins to paint his face with clay and earth, masking his humanity from the pigs and inspiring terrible awe amongst the boys.

Jack's transition puts him on a collision course with Ralph's elected authority. As Jack leaves and takes the majority of the boys with him, lured by the promises of meat, play, and freedom, there has arisen a clear dividing line between the two. Jack represents the irrational nature of the boys, while Ralph represents rationality. Under Jack's rule, the baseness of human nature is unleashed, and he initiates a period of inter-tribal violence, punishing other children, inciting the frenzy that leads to the murder of Simon, and torturing the twins until they submit to his authority.

The tale ends with Jack leading many of the boys in a frenzied attempt to kill Ralph. At this time, the last remaining vestiges of civilization are gone, and Ralph's demise is only prevented by the abrupt and unexpected arrival of a naval officer, who is disappointed by the savage nature of the British boys.[10]

Roger

Roger, at first, is a simple "bigun" who is having fun during his stay on the island. Along with Maurice, he destroys the sand castles made by three small children. While Maurice feels guilt for kicking sand into a child's eye, Roger begins to throw stones at one of the boys. The book states that Roger threw the stones to miss, and felt the presence of civilization and society preventing him from harming the children.[18] Later, once he feels that all aspects of conventional society are gone, he is left alone to his animal urges. During a pig hunt, Roger shoves a sharpened stick up the animal's rectum while it is still alive.[19] He kills Piggy with a boulder that was no longer aimed to miss, and becomes the executioner and torturer of Jack's tribe. He also tortured Sam and Eric into joining Jack's tribe. In the final hunt for Ralph at the end of the novel, Roger is armed with "a stick sharpened at both ends,"[20] indicating his intentions of killing Ralph and offering his head as a sacrifice to the "beast". He represents the person who enjoys hurting others, and is only restrained by the rules of society.[21]

Simon

Simon is a character who represents peace and tranquillity and positivity. He is in tune with the island, and often experiences extraordinary sensations when listening to its sounds. He loves the nature of the island. He is positive about the future. He has an extreme aversion to the pig's head, the "Lord of the Flies", which derides and taunts Simon in a hallucination. After this experience, Simon emerges from the forest to tell the others that the "beast" that fell from the sky is actually a

deceased parachutist caught on the mountain. He is brutally killed by the boys, who ironically mistake him for the beast and kill him in their "dance" in which they "ripped and tore at the beast". It is implied that Ralph, Piggy, Sam and Eric partake in the killing. The final words that the Lord of the Flies had said to Simon vaguely predicted that his death was about to occur in this manner. Earlier in the novel Simon himself also predicts his own death when he tells Ralph that he will "get back all right",[22] implying that, of the two of them, only Ralph will be saved. Simon's death represents the loss of truth, innocence, and common sense.[10] Simon is most commonly interpreted as a Christ figure because of his ability to see through misconception, unlike the rest of the boys, and the events he experiences in the book that parallel those of Jesus' life.

Naval Officer

Arriving moments before Ralph's seemingly impending death, the Royal Navy officer is surprised and disappointed to learn that the boys' society has collapsed into chaos. He states that he would have expected "a better show"[23] from British children. The sudden looming appearance of an adult authority figure instantly reduces the savagery of the hunt to a brutal children's game. Upon the officer asking who is in charge, Ralph answers loudly, "I am",[23] and Jack, who was previously characterised as a powerful leader, is reduced to "A little boy who wore the remains of an extraordinary black cap on his red hair and who carried the remains of a pair of spectacles at his waist".[23] In the last sentence, the officer, embarrassed by the distress of the children, turns to look at the cruiser from which his party has landed – a symbol of his own adult war.

The Beast

The Beast is first mentioned by a "littlun" and the notion is immediately dismissed by Ralph. The Beast is thought to be within the water and described by the littluns as such. Soon after the rumours of the Beast begin to flourish, the corpse of a fighter pilot, ejected from his aircraft, falls to the island. His parachute becomes entangled in the jungle foliage in such a way that sporadic gusts of wind cause the chute to billow and the body to move as if still alive. Sam and Eric discover the parachutist in the dark and believe that it is the beast. Ralph, Jack, and Roger search for the Beast and encounter it on the mountain. The reality of the Beast is now firmly established in the boys' minds. Simon discovers the parachutist and realises that the beast is really only the corpse of a man. Jack's tribe feeds the Beast with the sow's head on a stick. This act symbolises Jack's willingness to succumb to the temptation of animalism.

Simon is the first child on the island to realise that the Beast is created by the boys' fear. He decides that "the news must reach the others as soon as possible".[24] Meanwhile, the boys have been feasting and begin to do their tribal pig-hunting dance. When "the beast stumble[s] in to the horseshoe",[25] the frenzied, terrified boys "leapt on to the beast, screamed, struck, bit, tore".[26] It becomes clear that the boys have mistaken Simon for the beast and murdered him both when Golding describes "Simon's dead body move[ing] out towards the open sea",[27] and on the morning after when Ralph tells Piggy, "That was Simon. [...] That was murder".[28]

The Lord of the Flies

The eponymous Lord of the Flies is a pig's head that has been cut off by Jack, put on a stick sharpened at both ends, stuck in the ground and left as an offering to the "beast". Created out of fear, the Lord of the Flies used to be a mother sow who, though at one time clean, loving, and innocent, has now become a manically smiling, bleeding image of horror. Near the end of the book, while Ralph is being hunted down, he strikes this twice in one moment of blind anger, causing it to crack and fall on the ground with a grin "now six feet across".[29] This transformation parallels the transformation that Jack and the boys have undergone during their time in the island. The name "Lord of the Flies" is a literal translation of Beelzebub, a demonic figure that is often considered synonymous with Satan.

Once the Lord of the Flies appears in the book in chapter 8, the significance of the title becomes apparent. The Lord of the Flies is finally named: The Pig. "Pig" is a symbol and a literal term for a glutton. The Cardinal Sin of Gluttony is sometimes linked to Beelzebub, whose classical title is "Lord of the Flies"

Film adaptations

There have been four film adaptations:

- Lord of the Flies (1963), directed by Peter Brook
- Lord of the Flies (1990), directed by Harry Hook
- Alkitrang dugo (1976), a Filipino film, with a female role
- Island (2011), a British film based on the novel, set during a nuclear disaster

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sir William Gerald Golding (19 September 1911 – 19 June 1993) was a British novelist, poet, playwright and Nobel Prize for Literature laureate, best known for his novel Lord of the Flies. He was also awarded the Booker Prize for literature in 1980 for his novel Rites of Passage, the first book of the trilogy To the Ends of the Earth.

In 2008, The Times ranked Golding third on their list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945".[1]

William Golding was born in his grandmother's house, 47 Mountwise, Newquay, Cornwall[2] and he spent many childhood holidays there. He grew up at his family home in Marlborough, Wiltshire, where his father (Alec Golding) was a science master at Marlborough Grammar School (1905 to retirement). Alec Golding was a socialist with a strong commitment to scientific rationalism, and the young Golding and his elder brother Joseph attended the school where his father taught.[3] His mother, Mildred

(Curnroe),[4] kept house at 29, The Green, Marlborough, and supported the moderate campaigners for female suffrage. In 1930 Golding went to Oxford University as an undergraduate at Brasenose College, where he read Natural Sciences for two years before transferring to English Literature.[5]

Golding took his B.A. (Hons) Second Class in the summer of 1934, and later that year his first book, Poems, was published in London by Macmillan & Co, through the help of his Oxford friend, the anthroposophist Adam Bittleston.

Marriage and family

Golding married Ann Brookfield, an analytic chemist,[6](p161) on 30 September 1939 and they had two children, Judy and David.[2]

War service

William Golding joined the Royal Navy in 1940.[7] During World War II, Golding fought in the Royal Navy and was briefly involved in the pursuit and sinking of Germany's mightiest battleship, the Bismarck. He also participated in the invasion of Normandy on D-Day, commanding a landing ship that fired salvoes of rockets onto the beaches, and then in a naval action at Walcheren in which 23 out of 24 assault craft were sunk.[8] At the war's end, he returned to teaching and writing.[2]

Death

In 1985, Golding and his wife moved to Tullimaar House at Perranarworthal, near Truro, Cornwall, where he died of heart failure, eight years later, on 19 June 1993.[citation needed] He was buried in the village churchyard at Bowerchalke, South Wiltshire (near the Hampshire and Dorset county boundaries). He left the draft of a novel, The Double Tongue, set in ancient Delphi, which was published posthumously.[9][10] He is survived by his daughter, the author Judy Golding, and his son David, who still lives at Tullimaar House.

Career

Writing success

In September 1953, Golding sent a manuscript to Faber & Faber of London. Initially rejected by a reader there, the book was championed by Charles Monteith, then a new editor at the firm. He asked for various cuts in the text and the novel was published in September 1954 as Lord of the Flies. It was shortly followed by other novels, including The Inheritors, Pincher Martin and Free Fall.

Publishing success made it possible for Golding to resign his teaching post at Bishop Wordsworth's School in 1961, and he spent that academic year in the United States as writer-in-residence at Hollins College, near Roanoke, Virginia. Having moved in 1958 from Salisbury to nearby Bowerchalke, he met his fellow villager and walking companion James Lovelock. The two discussed Lovelock's hypothesis that the living matter of the planet Earth functions like a single organism, and Golding suggested naming this hypothesis after Gaia, the goddess of the earth in Greek mythology.

In 1970, Golding was a candidate for the Chancellorship of the University of Kent at Canterbury, but lost to the politician and leader of the

Liberal Party Jo Grimond. Golding won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1979, and the Booker Prize in 1980. In 1983 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, a choice which was, according to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, "an unexpected and even contentious choice, with most English critics and academics favouring Graham Greene or Anthony Burgess".[11] He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1988.[12]

The ONDB asserts that "At the end of the twentieth century, Golding's reputation was at its highest in continental Europe, particularly in Belgium, Holland, Germany, and France".[11]

Fiction

Golding's often allegorical fiction makes broad use of allusions to classical literature, mythology, and Christian symbolism. No distinct thread unites his novels (unless it be a fundamental pessimism about humanity), and the subject matter and technique vary. However his novels are often set in closed communities such as islands, villages, monasteries, groups of hunter-gatherers, ships at sea or a pharaoh's court. His first novel, Lord of the Flies (1954; film, 1963 and 1990; play, adapted by Nigel Williams, 1995), dealt with an unsuccessful struggle against barbarism and war, thus showing the moral ambiguity and fragility of civilization. It has also been said that it is an allegory of World War II. The Inheritors (1955) looked back into prehistory, advancing the thesis that humankind's evolutionary ancestors, "the new people" (generally identified with Homo sapiens sapiens), triumphed over a gentler race (generally identified with Neanderthals) as much by violence and deceit as by natural superiority. The Spire (1964) follows the building (and near collapse) of a huge spire onto a mediæval cathedral church (generally assumed to be Salisbury Cathedral); the church and the spire itself act as a potent symbols both of the dean's highest spiritual aspirations and of his worldly vanities. His 1956 novel Pincher Martin concerns the last moments of a sailor thrown into the north Atlantic after his ship is attacked. The structure is echoed by that of the later Booker Prize winner by Yann Martel, Life of Pi. The 1967 novel The Pyramid comprises three separate stories linked by a common setting (a small English town in the 1920s) and narrator. The Scorpion God (1971) is a volume of three novellas set in a prehistoric African hunter-gatherer band ('Clonk, Clonk'), an ancient Egyptian court ('The Scorpion God') and the court of a Roman emperor ('Envoy Extraordinary'). The last of these is a reworking of his 1958 play The Brass Butterfly.

Golding's later novels include Darkness Visible (1979), The Paper Men (1984), and the comic-historical sea trilogy To the Ends of the Earth, comprising the Booker Prize-winning Rites of Passage (1980), Close Quarters (1987), and Fire Down Below (1989).

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Seahorse was written in 1948. It is a biographical account of sailing on the south coast of England whilst in training for D-Day.[14]

Circle Under the Sea is an adventure novel about a writer who sails to discover archaeological treasures off the coast of the Scilly Isles.[15]

Short Measure is a novel set in a British boarding school.[16]

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